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## Review of “What is Ancient Philosophy?”

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## Book Review

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*What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Pierre Hadot (trans. Michael Chase). Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. ISBN:0-674-01373-5

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One of the few philosophy books to be discussed in the popular press, this recent work by Pierre Hadot got a rave review in the *New York Times* (August 18, 2002) by one of its editors. Philosophers, especially those schooled in the analytic tradition, may be less enthusiastic about it. Hadot argues that in ancient Greece philosophy was regarded as a way of living, and communitarian, while too much contemporary philosophy is discursive, a matter of words rather than deeds. Hadot's theme is captured in a remark of Petrarch, which he quotes approvingly: "It is more important to want the good than it is to know the truth." Of course, wanting the good and wanting to know the truth are not incompatible, so the book's thesis involves a matter of emphasis. According to Hadot, the ancient Greeks had it right when they stressed what he refers to as "lived experience" rather than theorizing. A learned study in many ways, the book is disappointing for its tendency to refer the reader to other texts when controversial points arise, without explaining how their authors argue for their conclusions. One is thus left with the author's words, but no experience of his reasoning.

Hadot thinks the word "philosophy" should be used not to describe a "professor sitting in a chair" but rather those whose lives "confirm their teaching by their acts." Philosophers should not merely talk and write qua philosophers, and the best philosophers have not done so but have created admirable ways of living. Looking at the ancient world it is easier to make this case with respect to some philosophers than others. Aristotle is something of a stumbling block, while the Stoics and Epicureans help smooth the way to Hadot's conclusions. Aristotle's ethical writing is *eudaimonistic*, of course, and Aristotle does think that people will not be improved merely by hearing his lectures. Nonetheless, there is a lot of theorizing in the Philosopher's work as we know it, and he had an influence on the Schoolmen that Hadot does not regard as salutary because they inclined toward reducing philosophy to its conceptual content, a way of philosophizing alive in universities today. The view of philosophy as pure theorizing is unfaithful to its origin in Greek philosophizing which, Hadot argues, conceived philosophy as a way of living virtuously. Philosophy begins not in wonder that is resolved in theoretical activity but "in a choice of life and an existential option." Such choices, he contends, are always made in the context of a community or school that corresponds to a way of life, even Socrates' choice, presumably. This way of life is not opposed to philosophical discourse because "discourse can have a practical aspect, to the extent that it tends to produce an effect on the listener or reader." And discourse can be meditative. Hadot traces this theme from fifth century Greece to Medieval Christianity and Modern Times, where he describes "eclipses and recurrences of the ancient concept of philosophy."

In treating ancient conceptions of philosophy, scholars often cannot decide whether to render *sophia* as “knowledge” or “wisdom,” but Hadot contends with perhaps unwarranted certainty that **“real knowledge is know-how, and true know-how is knowing how to do the good.”** He argues for this point by citing examples of the use of *sophia* and its variants from the *Iliad* and Hesiod and other contexts, but does not discuss the import of “real” and “true” in this extremely strong claim about the nature of *sophia*. In his view it is clear that for Socrates, for instance, “the real problem is therefore not the problem of knowing this or that, but of being in this or that way” because the force of Socratic questioning is to induce self criticism and its consequent awareness. But what sort of awareness and way of being is at issue here, particularly since Hadot regards the Socratic persona as perhaps the first appearance of the Individual in history, where the Individual is unique and unclassifiable? How could an Individual, in this sense, represent a way of being? Hadot claims that the force of Socratic individuality nevertheless worked to “awaken the individuality of his interlocutors.” How it does so remains mysterious in this work. He also asserts that “caring for ourselves and questioning ourselves occur only when our individuality is transcended and we rise to the level of universality, which is represented by what . . . two interlocutors have in common.”

One wants to know what the connection is between know-how, a way of being, and philosophy. Hadot points to “knowing what is valuable,” which presumably results from self-criticism and leads to knowing how to live. This knowledge of what is valuable, he says in the case of Socrates, is taken from his “inner experience – the experience of a choice which implicates him entirely.” It is unclear, however, how the philosopher’s activity can lead to this sort of self-discovery or what it is that one discovers, or as Hadot puts it, how the philosopher permits his interlocutor to realize what the true good is and what true value is. The nature of this “existential choice” is left frustratingly mysterious. In general, Hadot seldom entertains possible objections to his claims. This is not to say that he fails to argue for his thesis, but that too often what appear to be rather obvious worries and counter-arguments remain unaddressed.

Many analytically-minded philosophers will find his bibliography obscure, for despite the fact of its concentration on ancient Greek philosophy, he refers to virtually no British or American scholars. This is obviously not in itself an objection to the book; but the scope of his concern can be gleaned from remarks like the following: “The dominance of Idealism over *all university philosophy*, from Hegel to the rise of existentialism and subsequently the vogue of structuralism, has done much to foster the idea that the only true philosophy must be theoretical and systematic” (my italics).

Hadot believes that despite the dominance of the philosophy-as-conceptual-content model in the modern university, there have been exceptions from the rise of Modernism to the present in which philosophy is seen as a way of life or spiritual exercise. For example, Hadot thinks that Descartes titled one of his works *Meditations* because each *Meditation* “is indeed a spiritual exercise – that is, work by oneself and upon oneself which must be finished before one can move to the next stage.” He also thinks that the theoretical discourse of Kant “is linked to a decision – an act of faith leading to the choice of a certain way of life, inspired, in the last analysis, by the model of the sage.” I will leave it to his readers to determine whether he argues successfully for these views.

The book consists of twelve chapters ranging over the history of philosophy, with seven of the chapters focused on ancient Greek thought up to the Hellenistic period. There is also a chapter on “Christianity as a revealed philosophy” and, in the paperback edition, 39 pages of Notes, a separate

Bibliography of ancient sources, a Chronology showing when philosophers mentioned in the text were active, and a detailed Index. The translator observes that some of Hadot's translations of ancient sources are nonstandard and that he has consulted with Hadot on the translation. The text is virtually free of printing errors.

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